# RPG Reload File 070 – 'Avadon: The Black Fortress HD'

February 18, 2016 by Shaun Musgrave

Hello, gentle readers, and welcome to the **RPG Reload**, the weekly feature where beards beat dragons every time. Each week, we take a look at an RPG from the App Store's past to see how it holds up in the here and now. It's a chance to revisit old favorites, reflect on their place in the overall iOS library, and to take a deeper dive than our reviews typically allow. I try to present a balanced plate of RPGs from week to week, but if you feel like I'm missing something important, please let me know. You can do that by commenting below, posting in the Official RPG Reload Club thread, or by tweeting me at @RPGReload. You might not see it soon, but I will add your suggestion to my master list, so you'll be able to look forward to seeing it someday.

The sign says - Arrival Hall. All prisoners must be signed in!

First of all, I have to apologize about the screenshots in this week's article. We've been lucky so far, but I suppose a technical problem had to mess with my schedule sooner or later. I was very deep into my replay of this week's game a couple of days ago when, suddenly, my iPad developed a habit of restarting itself randomly. I haven't been able to fix it or keep it on long enough to get my screenshots off of it, so I had to just start a new file and grab some shots from early in the game. They are not very exciting, but it is what it is. Let's all wish my iPad a safe trip to the iPad hospital and a quick recovery, yes? He's worked awfully hard these last couple years.

Today, we're stepping back into the world of Spiderweb Software's RPGs with a look at *Avadon: The Black Fortress HD* ($9.99). It was almost a year ago exactly that we featured that developer's *Avernum: Escape From The Pit HD* ($9.99) here in the **Reload**, and I'd recommend heading back and

, if you haven't already, to get some background information on Spiderweb Software. The short version is that Spiderweb is largely a two-person independent developer that has been making RPGs since the mid-90s. While *Avernum* is a remake of Spiderweb's first game, 1995's *Exile*, it wasn't the first experience iOS would have with the developer. Instead, that honor goes to *Avadon*, which kicked off a completely new story and setting. The story is planned to span three games, and with the third one most likely coming later this year, it seemed as good a time as any to take another trip back to where it all started.



As the first decade of the 2000s came to a close, Spiderweb's *Geneforge* series had been wrapped up and the developer was putting the finishing touches on the sixth and final game in the *Avernum* series. For the first time in almost 10 years, it was time to put together a whole new world and story.

We aren't always privy to where developers draw their inspirations from, but in this case, Jeff Vogel of Spiderweb revealed it in a developer diary for the game on his blog. He and his wife had gone to a one-act Hungarian opera called *Bluebeard's Castle*, which itself was based on an old French folktale. You can read the specifics of the story [at Mr. Vogel's blog](), but suffice it to say, the enigmatic, powerful character of Bluebeard proved to be the seed of Vogel's new game's world.

*Avadon* is set in the continent of Lynaeus. Like most lands worth their salt in an RPG, this one is divided up into various nations who don't have the friendliest of relationships with each other. The forces of the Farlands represent the greatest threat to most of the other nations, so an uneasy Pact is formed to hold them back. At the center of it all is the fortress of Avadon, ruled by a powerful, seemingly ageless man by the name of Redbeard. He and his forces are charged with protecting the Pact, acting as sort of a fantasy police force. Those who serve Avadon have permission to break the rules of the Pact if it is deemed necessary, and you know the story is going to have its fun with that. You play as a new recruit to Avadon, and your first day is a doozy. There's been some kind of attack, and prisoners have escaped. You're sent down into the dungeons to try to recapture them or at least find out where they might have gone. You'll get your first whiff here that something is suspicious about Avadon. Upon finishing your task, you're allowed to finally meet Redbeard, who seems at least as jovial as he does scary. After that, you'll begin your regular work, though I use the word 'regular' very liberally.

Avadon. The Black Fortress.

The warriors of Avadon watch over the five nations of the Pact. When anyone acts to harm the peace and tranquility of the Pact, Avadon has the authority to destroy them. Its authority and independence are almost without limit.

And Avadon's power is not only over the outsiders of the Farlands. Anyone who tries to weaken the Pact from within is subject to punishment. Brigands, spies, politicians, all have reason to fear the eye of Avadon, and the attention of its master: Keeper Redbeard.

*Avadon: The Black Fortress* released on Mac computers on the last day of February of 2011, with a PC version following in May and the iPad version coming in June. While the game drew some criticism from certain camps for being a more streamlined RPG than previous Spiderweb games, for the most part the response was a warm one on all platforms. Reviews were favorable, the players seemed happy, and financially, the game appears to have been a pretty good success for Spiderweb. The response from iPad owners was particularly warm, showing there was a demand for this kind of game on the platform that wasn't being met. Much of the praise centered around the story and writing, and those aspects are certainly among the game's strengths, in my opinion. The game does a few things quite differently from *Avernum* and *Geneforge*, and I think in examining them, it's easy enough to see how this appealed to a new, likely larger, set of players. It's also not difficult to see why some people found the game off-putting.

The *Avernum* games are basically about letting the players cut loose *Ultima*-style in a big, somewhat-open world. You generate your whole party, manage all of their skills and stats on a very granular level, and basically go wherever your gut and strength will take you. There's a main plotline to follow, and the essential goal is laid out from the beginning, but the path you'll be taking there is far from clear, nor is completing your goal terribly urgent even in a narrative sense. Escape whenever can find a way to, and do whatever you feel like doing on the way. Compared to that game, *Avadon* is a much more guided experience, and one whose ultimate goal isn't obvious from the beginning. Sure, there's a big world, and lots of side-quests to be found, but if you don't care to hop off the rails, you'll never have to. Some people see that as a bad thing, but I just see it as a different approach from Spiderweb's other games, and there's nothing wrong with a little variety.

Right from the start, *Avadon* presents fewer options than *Avernum*. You must choose your character from a total of four different job classes, each of them pre-built and ready to go. There are two men, a fighter and a ninja, and two women, a shaman and a sorceress. All of them are quite capable in their own ways, and none are meant to be played as pure support types. It doesn't matter a great deal who you choose here, because you'll soon have the option to recruit a character of each job class. Each class has their own unique skills to learn, though there's a fair bit of variation within each due to some carefully-planned skill trees. There are also plenty of weapons and armor pieces that are class-restricted. One interesting point is that while there are four job classes, you can only have three party members at any given time. You'll always be missing someone's skills, though the game is balanced well enough that any group can win.

The fortress of Avadon acts as a hub for most of your adventures. As an enforcement agent, you'll be called out to various locations within the five nations to solve problems, settle disputes, or perform other tasks. After finishing the job in whatever way you deem appropriate, you can come back the fortress and rest up for your next quest. Naturally, you'll eventually reach a point where this formula is broken, and there are a lot of twists and turns that come in the game's back half particularly, but it's a good, comfortable routine that gets you settled into this new world. It also presents Mr. Vogel with the opportunity to show off his talent for writing interesting vignettes. Some of them are amusing, others quite dark, and a few are even a little heart-breaking. They might even be more than one of those, depending on how you play your character in the dialogue choices. I opted to play as more of a jerk than I did in my initial playthrough last year, though with how ambiguous some of the situations are, it's not always clear which actions actually represent being a bigger jerk.

The battle system isn't anything surprising, going for a turn-based set-up laid out on a grid. To be honest, it's a little dull in the early going. Once you open up more skills and start facing off against bigger and more powerful groups of monsters, it's more enjoyable. It's not as difficult of a game as *Avernum*, where you could easily find yourself slamming up against a brick wall of a boss if you went too far in the wrong direction, but it's tough enough that the average player will enjoy themselves on the normal difficulty level, I think. No promises if you go off the rails, mind you. If you go looking for trouble, you'll probably find it.

I'll admit that the more linear structure of *Avadon* when compared to *Avernum* meant that it didn't occupy my thoughts to quite the same extent. At the same time, the added structure ensured that the time I spent with the game was more productive. So, certainly a different experience from
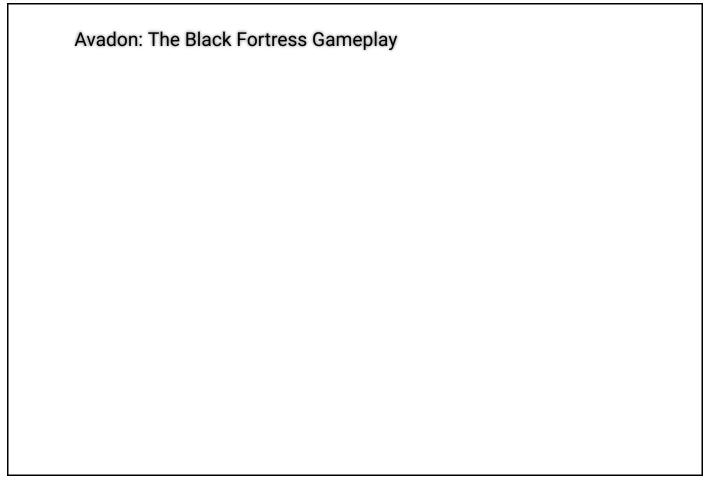
*Avernum*, but not necessarily a worse one. It was certainly easier to segment the game out into smaller play sessions, and that's probably a better scenario for people who aren't playing these things for a living. And while I think I like the world of *Avernum* better, *Avadon*'s got an overall stronger story. The characters are more memorable, the mini-scenarios are more interesting, and the main plot gets you wondering about where it's going to go, at least for a little while. I feel like *Avernum*'s story didn't really heat up until near the end, while *Avadon*, in keeping with its more linear approach, is there during most of the game. As a result, *Avadon* feels considerably more informed by Bioware's later games as opposed to its earlier ones, and I wouldn't be surprised if *Dragon Age: Origins* didn't at least partly inspire some aspects of the game.



For all that I've said about *Avadon* being a linear game, it's still incredibly big

and open compared to most iPad RPGs. It might look and sound more primitive in some respects, but in terms of gameplay, I'd happily put it up against most of the other CRPG-style games on the App Store. Considering it's mostly the work of one guy, that's awfully impressive. But maybe there's something in that? Jeff Vogel's been doing his thing for more than 20 years now, and when this game was released, he'd already had the personal experiences from more than a dozen game releases over the course of 15 years. Most of the triumphs were his to enjoy, but so were the criticisms and faults. I have to believe that kind of personal responsibility works as a strong motivator to improve things as much as you can with each new release. That might be why, in terms of gameplay design, these indie RPGs can stand up to games with considerably bigger budgets and prestige.

As with Spiderweb's other games, *Avadon* hasn't needed many updates and as such has only received a small handful over the last five years. For the most part, they've just been bug fixes, and the last one was issued in November of 2012. For a brief period last year, it appeared that Spiderweb had given up on the iOS market, leaving the future of its games in doubt. With the developer's triumphant return with the fixed release of *Avernum 2: Crystal Souls HD* [($9.99)](), however, things look pretty rosy for the future of these titles. Unless there's some reason that Vogel can't fix these games, I'm pretty sure he'll keep them working for a long time to come.

Avadon: The Black Fortress Gameplay

Anyway, that's my take on *Avadon: The Black Fortress HD*. What do you all think? Do you prefer *Avernum*'s more open-ended structure, or is *Avadon* your preference? You can let me know by commenting below, posting in the [Official RPG Reload Club thread](#), or by tweeting me at [@RPGReload](#). Better still, we're recording the next episode of the **RPG Reload Podcast** this weekend, and *Avadon* is the main topic. So if you have any questions, please send them in to [rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com](mailto:rpgreloadpodcast@gmail.com). As for me, I'll be back next week with a pretty big RPG that most of you have likely played before. Thanks for reading!

**Next Week's Reload:** *Final Fantasy 3* [($14.99)](#)